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SUBJECT: JUSTICE MINISTER APPOINTED DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Ref: Dublin 1044

11. (U) On September 13, Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Bertie Ahern appointed as Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste) the new leader of the Progressive Democrats (PD) party and current Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Michael McDowell. (In Ireland, the leader of the minority party in a coalition government, such as the current Fianna Fail-PD coalition, is usually appointed Tanaiste, although this is not constitutionally required.) McDowell took over unopposed as PD leader on September 11, following the unexpected resignation of Mary Harney, who had been PD leader for nearly 13 years and Tanaiste for 9 (reftel). McDowell avoided a possibly divisive leadership election campaign within the PD party when he offered potential rival candidates key positions within the party hierarchy in return for their support. Just as McDowell will retain his portfolio as Justice Minister, Harney will remain Minister for Health and Children. Following his selection as party leader, McDowell stated that the PDs would remain in government with Fianna Fail and carry forward the coalition's program of government through the remainder of its term until the expected spring 2007 general elections.

McDowell's Bio

12. (SBU) McDowell hails from a political family, and his grandfather, in fact, was Ireland's first education minister. McDowell is himself an attorney by profession and first came to prominence in 1985 when he left the Fine Gael party to join Mary Harney in founding the Progressive Democrats. He was first elected to the Irish parliament (Dail) in 1987, lost his seat in 1989, regained it in 1992, and lost it again in 1997. McDowell became Attorney General in 1999, and, after reclaiming his Dail seat in the 2002 general elections, was appointed by Prime Minister Ahern as Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. He has taken a high profile as Minister, criticizing the involvement of the Provisional IRA in criminal activity and introducing police reserve units over the protests of the regular police force. He is candid, voluble, and unafraid of controversy in his regular media appearances. A key question is how well Prime Minister Ahern and Fianna Fail cabinet members will be able to contain inevitable disagreements with the sometimes volatile McDowell in the run-up to the 2007 general elections.

KENNY